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Sports in Education: Lack of Policy Level Focus and The Need for A Missionary Zeal

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There are two nations on this planet with a billion plus population. While one of them is a sporting power house the other is a 'leader' at the rear end! Both countries were at an interesting cusp in the middle of the 20th century; defining moments of 1949 and the end of the civil war established the People's Republic in China and in 1947 there was freedom from 200 years of British rule for India leading to the establishment of a Democratic Republic. Then China went the Maoist Communist way and India took the Democratic Socialist path. At this time, the two countries were more or less equal on various indices, sporting or otherwise; in fact, factsⁱ point out that India had the edge over China in many respects and given that China was 'closed' for the world they did not even have the exposure that India had in the international arena.

The contrast in international sports between these two countries could not be starker with India having participated in the Olympicsⁱⁱ continuously since 1920 and China participating in it continuously only since 1984, that is, just 25 years from the 2008 Games which it hosted. However, China has won a staggering 385 medals in nine games and India's tally is a mere 20 medals after participating in 23 games! In the 2008 games China won a 100 medals with 51 of them being Gold and in contrast India won 3 medals with one of them being the first time ever gold for an individual Indian sportsperson. China was placed 4th in the '96 games, 3rd in the 2000 games, 2nd in the '04 games and stood first in the games that it hosted in 2008. In contrast India's ranking has been 71st in '96 and 2000 Games, and 65 and 50 in the subsequent onesⁱⁱⁱ.

This comparison is not to be construed as an argument to establish the kind of system China has, be it in sports or in governance, but only to drive home the

point that two neighbours with similar population size and beginning a new chapter in their history around the same time have gone two different ways in their sporting achievement.

Given this reality it is necessary for us in India to introspect – because we have gone 'nowhere'



And for now I would like to put forward a simplistic argument to keep the Communist system versus a Democratic system argument out of this discussion by stating that role of the communist system will not explain the sporting success of capitalist democracies. India stands last among the 125 nations that have won at least one medal; so, ranked above the Socialist Democratic Republic of India are nations that are under communism, capitalism, theology, autocracy, monarchy and any other system thereby clearly indicating that the India versus China debate should not be viewed through the framework of the governance system that exists in the two countries.

Many explanations have been provided and numerous theories have been expounded on the reasons for India's failure in the international sporting arena. In 2008, two academics from the Duke University in the U.S. wrote in a research paper^v that 'Turkey, which has less than one-tenth of India's population, won 10 times as many medals in 2004; Thailand, with just 6% of India's people, managed eight times as many medals'. In that paper they went on to contend that the key success factor for a country in this regard is the aspect of 'social mobility'. However, they also go on to add that Cuba, Ethiopia, Kazakhstan, Kenya and

Uzbekistan are countries not known for having high average incomes which have won many more medals than India. One could therefore say, there is some truth in many of the factors associated with India's dismal performance in sports - such as:

- poverty in the population (some estimates point out that nearly 80% of our population are poor^{vi})
- malnutrition (India ranks 2nd in the world in malnutrition^{vii})
- neglected infrastructure (the only individual gold medalist for India is Abhinav Bindra^{viii} whose father built a private shooting range for him speaks volumes of the public facilities that we have)
- the lack of sponsorship (Indian sprint queen P.T.Usha had a cash starved start to her athletics academy and continues to struggle to run it^{ix})
- political corruption (CWG scam^x) and institutional dis-organisation (the recent withdrawal of Champions Trophy Hockey tournament by IHF^{xi} due to the infighting within our hockey establishment)
- the predominance of cricket (reigning world champions in one of the formats of this game) and
- other cultural factors (we have a fat-heavy diet and even our sports persons are known to be less fit, leave alone the average citizen).

However, there is one factor that most analysis miss and that is the serious lack of 'Sports' in our formal education system - the role or lack of it that sports plays in our schools. It is this aspect that I would like to highlight in this article.

I would like to argue that the root of our problem of under achievement in sports is in not providing the required impetus for it from the elementary level of schooling thereby not contributing towards creation of a sport loving society. There are many schools in the country that focus on sports and strive to achieve a balance between academic achievements and sporting glory. However, at the policy level there is very little in this regard other than a weekly period designated

for 'physical education' (PE) which for a majority of students is an experience that is closer to military drills than of sporting enjoyment; while PE in a school involves all kinds of formal and planned physical activity including the morning assembly, sports is more about competitive games and other activities based on physical athleticism wherein one skill is pitted against another and the competitive spirit brings out the best in the participating individuals. In this article the focus is on the role of sports in the education system and how India has not done much in this regard. Given that sports is under the overarching umbrella of PE, the latter also forms part of the overall debate. It is common knowledge that what constitutes a PE period is decided by the PE teacher in our schools. The problem begins there because the PE teachers are on the job based on the certification (Diploma / Degree in Physical Education) that ails from similar if not identical ills of other teacher training programmes in the country which primarily are out of tune to the demands of the 21st century. These aspects reflect in the way the PE teachers go about their activities in the school setting.



With a cane stick in hand it is the PE teacher who monitors the punctuality of the students, their adherence to the uniform rules where applicable, standing in a straight line at the assembly, providing the 'attention', 'stand at ease' and 'disburse' commands at all school functions and every other discipline oriented aspect in the school. Hence, within a school environment the PE teacher is the most feared adult for the

students. This is completely contrary to what ideally a PE teacher should be for the students – the one who motivates them to excel, the one who urges the students to ‘push the limits’, the one who provides them with inspirational stories of sporting heroes thereby exciting them and encouraging them to the immense potential of the human body and surely the one whom the student’s can look up to^{xii}.

The country is not short on organisations that are supposed to deal with PE in schools or more specifically sports in the country, but they remain incognito because their work does not attract attention due to lack of progressiveness in their approach and thereby providing nothing fresh or ‘game-changing’. The designated body to look after the PE programmes in the country is the ‘All India Council of Physical Education’^{xiii} which is constituted by the Upper House of the Indian Parliament and of which very little is known. An example of an official document in this domain which does not come out with any progres-

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sive ideas is the National Council for Teacher Education’s document titled ‘Framework for Quality Teacher Education’ which has one chapter devoted to ‘Education of Teachers for Physical Education’^{xiv}. Other than lack of progressive ideas, none of these documents provide the required focus on sports within the PE nor do they look at an integrated approach to PE in the overall scheme of ‘education’.

But, nearly 25 years ago in the context of preparations for the NPE, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, speaking on 31 March 1986 at the National Primary Education Conference, had declared:

“Mere book learning does not develop character. It is formed through different regulated activities, through sports and playing in a team or playing by oneself.”

However, our emphasis on sports in education if at all has remained only in ‘speeches’ and not even on ‘paper’! Some ideas that have made it to the ‘paper’ (documents) are without concrete plan of action that are implementable and truly integrative. One may find all schools adhering to the policy of having annual sports days, but the important missing link is to integrate it to daily learning within and without the classrooms thereby building a positive culture towards sports. The fact that during the exam time all sports periods are cancelled to fit in more academic sessions indicates the mindset that exists which are primal and invariably uninformed of most recent researches^{xv} which indicate a positive correlation between regular PE and learning achievement.

The 1986 National Policy of Education^{xvi}, in its’ section titled ‘Sports & PE’, emphasizes the importance of sports & PE in any learning process and suggests making it part of the performance evaluation process and also calls for nation-wide PE infrastructure as part of the education edifice. It also mentions about the need to encourage those students who are talented in sports. However, the focus on getting the students to strive for excellence and to make sports a passion is missing. Even in the NCF 05 which had a separate sub-group working on PE there is a lot to be desired; the focus is entirely on health related PE activities and not really about sports and games. If a progressive document such as the NCF 05 is missing the point it really means we have not taken cognizance of the fact that to be lying at the bottom of the rank ladder in international sports does harm the image of the country and its’ people.

The SSA report^{xvii} on the Right to Education Act 2009, one of the most recent official documents suggesting measures towards the future of education in the country, continues the ignorance to sports shown in the earlier documents; it does not provide any emphasis on sports related aspects. Though the report does mention the obstacles of a subject based approach that our system follows today and how this kind of an approach makes building awareness on critical issues in the society a difficult one, it does not even take sports

as an example to elaborate this point. In the chapter on Curriculum and Evaluation under the title ‘Systemic Obstacles’ the SSA report on RtE mentions various aspects such as ‘Infusion of environment related knowledge and work related attitude in all subjects and at all levels’, ‘Linkages between school knowledge in different subjects and children’s everyday experiences’, ‘Appropriateness of topics and themes for relevant stages of children’s development and continuity from one level to the next’, ‘Inter-disciplinary and thematic linkages between topics listed for different school subjects which fall under discrete disciplinary areas’, and even ‘Nurturing aesthetic sensibility and values by integrating the arts and India’s heritage of crafts in every aspect of the curriculum’, but there is not a single mention of any PE related aspect, leave alone sports and games.

One may think that it is too much to expect organisations within the domain of education to come out with progressive documents on sports or PE as there are a number of issues to deal within the sphere of education itself. However, a look at what organisations that are tasked with managing and promoting sports in our country are doing also shows that ideas remain staid and more importantly lack the sports focus that is required for the country.



For instance, the objective of the National Youth Policy 2003^{xviii} by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports appears to be to create law abiding citizens

who remain wedded to the ideals laid down in the constitution and contribute to service of the community with respect for our history and culture and be the docile peace seeking people – nothing wrong with this objective, but coming from a ministry that is to look at youth affairs and sports it is disconcerting that not even once does the word ‘sports’ appear in either the objectives or the thrust areas! ‘Sports’ gets bucketed into the Department of Sports within the Ministry and it has nothing to do with the policy for youth affairs!! If there is no integration between the two departments within the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, one can imagine what would exist between Department of Education (under Ministry of Human Resource Development) and the Department of Sports which I argue is critical to take the country out of the rut.

The National Sports Policy (NSP) 2001^{xx} has one short paragraph on integrating sports with education ; the section is neither elaborated upon nor does it provide any meaningful concept but only mentions a few aspirational statements. The NSP 2007^{xxi} does put forth some good ideas, but it continues to remain a draft document indicating the lack of importance the country is giving to sports overall, leave alone sports in education. In January 2011 the National Sports Development Code of India (NSCI 2011)^{xxii} was notified by the Government of India and came into effect immediately; a perusal of this 200 plus page document makes you realise that it is more to regulate sports and make sure that the various National Sports Federations^{xxiii}, Sports Authority of India and Government agencies do not trample over each other, than to encourage sports per se. Of course streamlining the activities of the various agencies and encouraging them to deliver on their objectives is critical and will aid in developing the country’s sports image, however, there is an urgent need for a bottom up approach, and initiatives such as the ‘Panchayat Yuva Krida and Khel Abhiyan’^{xxiv} are in the right direction, but for it to succeed, what programmes are chalked out and how the implementation is planned and delivered is crucial. It is important that the end objective of these initiatives should be to establish a sporting culture at our village level - starting at the

village school. Providing access to decent sporting infrastructure is a dire need as there is a long way to go in even establishing the basic hygiene for sports; the total population of those below the age of 35 in our country is around 77 crore of which only around five crore have access to organised games and sports facilities observes the Draft NSP 07 document. This is an indication of how poor our policy implementation is because this situation persists even though the first NSP in 1984 mentioned the dire need to improve our sports infrastructure and in spite of having continued support for it through all our five year plans. The NSP 07 makes interesting observations based on data from educational surveys – ‘between 1978 and 2002 the access to playfields has actually gone down by 7% in primary, 9% in upper primary and 5% in secondary and high secondary schools. The availability of other sports facilities like indoor halls, gymnasias and equipment is even less than the basic outdoor play fields’. Even casual observation of the small schools that are mushrooming in our urban centres shows the lack of importance our schools place on any sports activity because most of these schools function out of large houses without even a portico, leave alone a play ground. One critical step forward will be to integrate our education policy with our sports policy.

There are private organisations^{xxv} that have set shop to cater to the needs of schools and individuals indicating the demand in the country for sports in education. While such organisations aid our elite schools (to hopefully create a few more Bindras), a vast majority of our population will have to contend with resources trained on the methodologies of the yesteryears there by not alleviating the problem showcased by the Duke University academics^{xxvi} as to how in spite of a billion strong population with a large percentage of youth, those who have the potential for international level sports performance in India will remain very low. Hence, the need is not only a critical one, but an urgent one as well. It is time our National Sports Federations (we have 62 of them) are mandated to chalk out strategies to popularise and encourage their respective sports in a phased and planned manner across the country.

I would like to argue that a complete re-look at how we view sports in education is required. We need to integrate sports into education in such a way that it is considered as a part and parcel of the learning experience and not something that is ‘extra-curricular’. The need to bring the importance of sports into the national consciousness and then to motivate the young to strive for excellence needs to become a mission. This need not wait for India to host international events such as the Asian Games or CWG or the Olympics; instead we could begin with having sports related examples and topics in our curricular activities. It should form a crucial part of our syllabus at all levels. At this point of time we are almost on a clean slate in this regard – a simple check would be to see how many famous sportspersons figure in our text books!

If, as a nation, we want to achieve the sporting success that we are capable of, there are many little things that can be done along with the policy level interventions. The topics of sports can be brought to centre stage even by individual teachers thereby apportioning it the same degree of respect and pride as any other curricular subjects. A Math teacher using athlete Usain Bolt’s figures to teach decimals or a Social Science teacher using the weightlifter Kunjarani Devi as a link to our North-East or a Physics teacher connecting pole vaulter Bubka to the gravitational force theory are a few straight forward examples of how a sports culture is developed in the primary school classrooms. It is this kind of a missionary zeal that is required to lift us from slumber and push us towards the glory that China has achieved, without their factory set up.

If we search ‘sports in education’ in Google scholar, of the eight links on page one, five are links from China based journals. The NSP ’07^{xxvii} also devotes considerable space to what China has done in this domain. Though, this is not the space to discuss the means adopted by China towards the ‘gold medal goals’, the fact of the matter is that China is a sporting super power and India is a laggard; some are more generous in calling India a ‘sleeping giant’. The China comparison to end this article is to highlight our laggardness and at the same time remind ourselves of

the country's potential. I believe that India is a sleeping giant; hence it is important we do things right, right now, to enable the awakening of the human spirit of adventure and thrill of sports in the young Indians who then could gain the potential to make India a 'Sports Super Power'.

What is undeniable is that a strong beginning has to be made in school itself if a nation has to wear the jersey of a sports nation. The fact that benefits of planned physical activity in school is not limited to health related aspects, but positively correlates to academic achievement as well (endnote xxii) should remove any obstacle one may have for integrating sports in education.

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- xi <http://www.fih.ch/en/news>
- xii The image of the PE teacher portrayed is conjured from what the author experienced during his school days and what he has seen in many, many schools across the country since passing out of school 2 decades back.
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